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General debate

Letter dated 13 August 2002 from the Secretary-General of the Association of South-East Asian Nations to the Secretary-General of the World Summit on Sustainable Development

I am pleased to inform you that the World Conference and Exhibition on Land and Forest Fire Hazards was held in Kuala Lumpur from 10 to 12 June 2002. The Conference provided an opportunity for the world community to examine the recurring episodes of land and forest fires and recommended strategies to prevent or minimize hazards arising from such fires on a sustained basis. A statement embodying the recommendations of the Conference is attached (see annex).**

The Ministers responsible for the environment of the 10 member States of the Association of South-East Asian Nations considered and endorsed the recommendations and urged that these be given due consideration by the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Accordingly, I, on behalf of the Ministers, have the honour to transmit the recommendations for your attention.

May I request that the recommendations be publicized and circulated as a document for the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

(*Signed*) Rodolfo C. **Severino**, Jr.

* A/CONF.199/1.
** The annex is being circulated in the language of submission only.

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Annex to the letter dated 13 August 2002 from the Secretary-General of the Association of South-East Asian Nations to the Secretary-General of the World Summit on Sustainable Development

STATEMENT TO THE WORLD SUMMIT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE WORLD LAND AND FOREST FIRE HAZARDS 2002: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION, 10-12 JUNE 2002, KUALA LUMPUR

1. Every year, millions of hectares of the world's forests are being consumed by fires, resulting in billions of dollars in fire suppression costs as well as causing tremendous damage to the environment. The ecological and environmental impacts of land and forest fires are manifested in the degradation of the quality of vegetation, erosion of biodiversity, damage to the health of forest ecosystems, loss of wildlife habitat, air, river and estuarine pollution, and overall ecological retrogression. Forest fires contribute to global climate change and warming. Burning of forests also destroys an important sink for atmospheric carbon.

2. There have been five major fire outbreaks in Southeast Asia, with small fires occurring almost annually. The fire episode that hit the ASEAN region during the El Niño drought of 1997 and 1998 has been particularly severe and most damaging in recorded history. The loss in terms of agricultural production, transportation, tourism, and other economic endeavors has been estimated at more than USD 9 billion. The cost to human health, loss of biodiversity, destruction of forests, and general environmental degradation was immeasurable.

3. ASEAN's response was swift. ASEAN Environment Ministers, the Haze Technical Task Force and relevant working groups have been established and been meeting frequently to draw up measures to deal with the problem. ASEAN adopted a Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP), with corresponding national action plans and implementation measures, prescribing urgent actions on three fronts – monitoring, prevention, and mitigation.

4. The land and forest fire and associated haze is a global issue as it is experienced in other parts of the world and the impacts extend beyond the boundaries of national jurisdiction. Bearing this in mind, the Government of Malaysia supported by the other ASEAN member countries, organized a World Conference and Exhibition on Land and Forest Fire Hazards to provide opportunities for the world community to examine issues of land and forest fires from various perspectives and come up with strategies to prevent or minimize hazards arising from such fires.

5. The Conference witnessed one of ASEAN's most important events, the signing of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution by the ten member countries of ASEAN. The Agreement is one of ASEAN's most significant agreements and a milestone in the regional effort to address transboundary haze pollution. It is the world's first such arrangement binding member states of a regional grouping to tackle transboundary haze pollution arising from land and forest fires. The Agreement reaffirms ASEAN's commitment to take specific actions to prevent and monitor land and forest fires and the resulting haze on a sustained basis. It contains provisions on monitoring, assessment and prevention, technical cooperation and scientific research, mechanisms for coordination, lines of communication, and simplified customs and immigration procedures for disaster relief. The Agreement establishes an ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control to facilitate cooperation and coordination in managing the impact of land and forest fires and haze pollution arising from such fires.

6. The World Conference and Exhibition on Land and Forest Fire Hazards was held on 10-12 June 2002 in Kuala Lumpur and attended by 500 international fire experts, senior government officials, researchers, industries, plantation companies, community leaders, individuals, practitioners, and international organizations to deliberate on issues of land and forest fire hazards and develop approaches and strategies to overcome the hazards. While major participation was from the ASEAN region, there was a good number of participants coming from other regions as well as international organizations around the world.

7. In the context of global, regional and local efforts, the Conference recommended the following areas of priority:

i. Capacity Building

Capacity building is central in the preventive, monitoring and fire suppression efforts to control land and forest fires. In order to strengthen the regional cooperative efforts, training of manpower is required to enhance early warning capabilities, monitoring, information management and dissemination, effective enforcement and fire suppression.

ii. Technology Transfer

Sustained assistance from international organizations, donor countries as well as the private sector is required to support or provide technology transfer in areas that include:

(a) A more precise and reliable prediction and detection of fire and haze using remote sensing and ground surveillance technology/techniques.

(b) Peat land management including effective utilization of peat areas without burning.

(c) Enhancing national capabilities in formulating various applicable measures to prevent land and forest fires.

iii. Health and Environmental Impact

There is a need to study the causes of fires and to assess its potential threat and impact on human health, air quality and greenhouse effect, loss of biodiversity, and damage to ecological system. Collaborative research with international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) would enhance the understanding of the nature and particularly the long-term effects of transboundary haze on public health and the measures to be taken in minimizing the problem.

iv. Roles of Stakeholders

Strengthening the involvement of the community, NGOs, private sector, academia and government institutions at local levels is most appropriate and important in program areas such as public education and awareness, exploitation of indigenous knowledge in agriculture practices that would avoid large scale burning and demonstration projects on alternative techniques to open burning.

v. Building Linkages and Partnership

Information sharing and exchange for fire early detection and warning methodologies to address fire management and the associated hazards as well as international cooperative initiatives could be facilitated by the formation of a regional network. Hence a Southeast Asia Network or ASEAN Network should be set up and linked to other regional networks to provide the flow of information and sharing of resources between the local, regional and global users.

vi. Regional Coordination and Mobilization

The establishment of a regional plan and standard operating procedures to effect the mobilization and sharing of resources to monitor, prevent and control land and forest fires should receive highest priority. In order to be prepared for large fire emergencies that may require assistance from outside the region, close cooperation should be established with relevant international entities.

vii. International Policies

The ASEAN countries should be actively involved in the process of developing strategies concerning the reduction of damages caused by land and forest fires for the implementation of the major UN conventions such as *Desertification, Biodiversity and Climate Change, and other arrangements, such as the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) and the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF).*

8. At the 9th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Haze on 11 June 2002, the ASEAN Environment Ministers emphasized that land and forest fires are worldwide phenomena with increasing incidence not only in developing countries but also in developed countries. The national, regional and global impacts due to biodiversity loss and emissions of greenhouse gases are enormous. The Ministers reiterated their call to the World Summit on Sustainable Development to accord special consideration to this complex issue. The Ministers urged the World Summit on Sustainable Development to demonstrate strong political commitment and agree on concrete targeted measures to tackle this problem on a sustained basis.

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